DRAFT
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Defining Deterrence

Introduction

This study is about deterrence and where it is heading. Therefore, we should be sure that we understand what deterrence means. This should be relatively straightforward, the US defense community has been analyzing and discussing deterrence for years. Nevertheless, we are now in a new era, and there is some confusion about the meaning of deterrence and how it should be applied to new circumstances..

Deterrence has been a central element in US strategy for more than fifty years. However, the term became distorted during the cold war. The heavy emphasis on nuclear weapons as a deterrent caused many to equate the term "deterrence" with nuclear weapons, and there are those who prefer this narrow definition today. However, deterrence has a long history that precedes nuclear weapons[1]. Today, we are moving into a more complex security environment, and it seems clear that there will less (but still some) reliance on nuclear weapons to deter. It is in this context that we need to re- examine the roots of deterrence.

Deterrence is more than nuclear weapons

Deterrence is not a policy, but a means of achieving broader policy objectives. It is one component of the nation's strategy for protecting and advancing its security interests. An effective deterrent can prevent the outbreak of a war or can curb the escalation of a conflict once it begins, particularly discouraging the use of weapons of mass destruction. In a broader sense, effective deterrence can prevent the occurrence of events which can be destabilizing to US national security. While deterrence will not always work, generally it is preferable to the alternative, e.g. fighting a destructive war or surrendering vital interests in order to avoid conflict. Furthermore, an effective deterrent can serve as a useful adjunct to negotiations.

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1 Keith Payne, "Deterring the use of weapons of mass destruction: lessons from history.(US policy)", Comparative Strategy, v14, n4 (Oct-Dec, 1995) :347 (13 pages)

The dictionary definition of "deterrence" is *to frighten to keep or discourage (a person) from doing something by instilling fear, anxiety, doubt, etc.* According to the Defense Department dictionary, *deterrence is a state of mind* (emphasis added) *brought about by the existence of a credible threat of unacceptable counteraction.* Nuclear weapons can be very effective in instilling fear, anxiety and doubts, but , unless the stakes are very high indeed, a threat to use nuclear weapons may not be believable, may not create the desired "state of mind". A threat to use more discriminate force may be more credible. Highly accurate non-nuclear weapons may prove as lethal to certain targets as nuclear weapons. Thus, as we leave the cold war behind and seek to deal with new strategic challenges, it is logical to consider a broad range of US military capabilities as a deterrent, and it is necessary to examine more closely how nuclear weapons fit into such a broader deterrent concept. It also will be important to examine the potential deterrent role of defenses which can cast doubt on the outcome of an aggressor's plans, and thus serve to deter them.

Capability and Will

The traditional formula, that deterrence is based on both capability and will, remains valid today. In judging another nation's military capability one must look not only at the present, but at the future. During the cold war, both the United States and the Soviet Union devoted considerable effort to assessing the opponent's future capabilities, and based their own planning on these estimates of future capabilities as well as present capabilities.

In assessing will, a nation tends to look backward at the history of a potential adversary in past crises and conflicts.. Perception of a nation's will is created over time, and by a series of events that test the willingness of a state to take risks in support of important security interests. For example, other nations judging the will of the United States to use deadly force in support of national interests will look at the recent history of the US, and may receive a mixed message. The 1990 Persian Gulf War is an example of US willingness to use force and to risk casualties, even though casualties were avoided. The rapid US withdrawal from Somalia in 1993-1994 and the hesitance to use ground forces in Bosnia and Kosovo could be read as a lack of will,

particularly when US security interests were less than vital. The legacy of Vietnam, where the US suffered heavy casualties and eventually abandoned the conflict, also has mixed echoes today. In any event the effectiveness of our deterrent is based not on how we judge our will, but how others will judge it in a particular circumstance. Furthermore, in a democracy like the United States, will is projected not just by the actions of leadership but also by the powerful influence of public opinion. The longer a crisis or conflict persists, the more latitude there is for public opinion to assert influence. Vietnam is but one example.

National will is expressed in the actions a nation is willing to take to protect its interests. and this, in turn, depends on the stakes involved. The forcefulness of a nation's actions are likely to be proportionate to the importance of the perceived interests involved. For a nation to threaten acts that would be more forceful or more risky than its interests dictate would likely be assessed as bluff by another party. There may be a danger today that lack of forcefulness in US actions will be assessed, by potential adversaries, as lack of wil,l whereas, at least in some cases, lack of action is commensurate with our assessment of our interests..

Deterrence and its cousins

Deterrence is closely related to two other concepts, "dissuasion" and "assurance" or reassurance. However, these concepts can be differentiated from deterrence.

Assurance is defined as *something said or done to inspire confidence, as a promise, positive statement, etc.; guarantee*. During the cold war it became common to refer to assurance or reassurance as a companion to or another facet of deterrence. Deterrence was what you sought to do to a potential adversary while assurance was what you offered to allies.[2] For example, positive security assurances to allies in NATO. Japan and elsewhere were designed to extend deterrence to third parties and discourage the development of independent nuclear capabilities. Of course, assured allies means solid alliances, which strenghtens deterrence.

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2 Sir Michael Howard, referenced in a speech by Adm. Richard C. Macke, 'Asia-Pacific Regional Security: Toward 2001', September 23,1994, AFIS Defense Issues, Vol. 9 No. 78 (http://www.chinfo.navy.mil/navpalib/intl/pacific/mack0923.txt)

In the post-cold war world it is a bit more complex. We may also wish to reassure potential adversaries or competitors. For example, the United States is now attempting to assure both China and Russia that a national missile defense should not be seen as a threat to them.

Dissuasion is defined as *to turn a person aside (from a course, etc.) by persuasion or advice. To advise against an action.* "Dissuasion" has a softer tone than "deterrence" and it is oriented more to the future . The concept has been used increasingly in the post cold-war period to describe efforts, somewhat less blunt than deterrence, to discourage proliferation of weapons of mass destruction or to discourage Russian rearmament.[3] In this meaning the totality of the US strategic posture, including potential for future expansion of forces, becomes the means of dissuasion. For example, it is frequently argued that if major reductions are made in strategic nuclear forces, the US needs to maintain a robust infrastructure as a hedge against Russian re-armament, and this hedge may help to dissuade that re-armament. The term "dissuasion" sometimes is used in an effort to give a new look to deterrence, but maintaining a distinction appears useful.

Criteria for deterrence

Probably the least understood and the most controversial aspect of deterrence is the criteria that should be used in assessing deterrence. Because deterrence exists in the mind of the "beholder" and is very situation dependent, it should be measured in those terms, i.e. *who are we trying to deter from doing what, in what circumstances and at what cost?* During the cold war the answer to this question was fairly straightforward. Today it is much more complex, for we are concerned with deterrence of a variety of possible actions by a variety of actors in a wide range of circumstances. Even if we limit the problem to deterring use of weapons of mass destruction, there are several possible users, there are several types of weapons, and there are a

3 An early description of the concept of dissuasion was set forth in an article by Richard Wagner and Ted Gold in 1990. There it was described as a means for "shaping the future environment". More recently see background briefing on the NPR of May 14, 2001 by Undersecretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz who described the "four overriding defense strategy objectives" as " to assure friends and allies...to dissuade future adversaries...to deter threats and counter coercion and ...to defeat adversaries if deterrence fails"

number of means of delivery. In many cases we have little idea about what deters a given state or leadership or alliance, and thus too often we base judgements about deterrence requirements on what would deter us, i.e. we mirror image.

Developing a more sophisticated understanding of what might deter the handful of states that possess or are acquiring weapons of mass destruction and which might use those weapons against US interests is a matter of high priority. Part of this assessment involves re-examining what US security interests are, and their priority. Each potential adversary and the context of each potential conflict requires separate analysis within a broad security policy framework.

We also need to examine further how hostile states might seek to deter US entry into a regional conflict and how asymmetry of stakes might affect our ability to deter aggression and the ability of a weaker military power to deter us. In the years ahead we can expect to be faced with situations where a state that is much weaker militarily but with a much higher stake in the outcome of a particular conflict will seek to deter the United States from intervention. An example would be a Chinese effort to prevent, by military means, the independence of Taiwan.

Deterrence and War Fighting

Related to criteria is an issue that has bedeviled deterrence planning for some years. This is the relationship between deterrence and war fighting capabilities. The purpose of deterrence is to prevent war or other destabilizing events from occurring , not to fight a war or be forced to retaliate. However, to deter war, and the use of weapons of mass destruction in war, a deterrent force must have credible capabilities and plans. For deterrence to be effective the potential aggressor must be persuaded that the deterrent force can and will be used and will be effective if used. At the height of a crisis, when the deteree is considering whether to launch an attack, he will consider whether he can limit the damage to himself by attacking the deterror's retaliatory forces. He also must consider whether the retaliation might be aimed, in part, at reserve forces he is likely to retain. War-fighting considerations influence deterrence in such ways, whether the scenario involves a nuclear arsenal exchange or deterrence in regional scenarios, with or without WMD.

Thus, it is not sufficient, as some argue, for military power simply to exists in order to deter. There must be forces and plans for these forces that make their use credible. A deterrent force must be survivable and pose a real military threat to assets that the deteree values. The characteristics of the force and the quality of the plans do make a difference. On the other hand, targeting plans do not deter directly, for the deteree does not know the details of these plans which receive the highest security protection. He can only infer what the plans are by examining the visible evidence of our capabilities and by assessment of what we choose to say about them. Thus, the criteria for assessing the effectiveness of deterrence differ from those applied to a war-fighting force. In designing a force to fight and win a war you want high confidence of success. In designing a deterrent force you want the adversary to be posed with a high prospect of failure or dire consequences. The differences are subtle but could have an important effect on force planning. The effectiveness of a deterrent is measured by how the state or leadership that you are seeking to deter perceives your capability and will, and how the two (or more) sides perceive the risks and consequences of deterrence failure. Admittedly, these are very difficult parameters to measure and they are situation dependent – e.g. if the stakes for two sides are widely disparate even an overwhelming military advantage may not deter. However, these are the factors we should be attempting to assess in designing a deterrent posture.

Today there are some who advocate development of new nuclear weapons both to enhance deterrence and to make our weapons more effective and reduce collateral damage if deterrence fails. Both goals – deterrence and war-fighting – may be legitimate goals for future US forces, and while the latter is easier to measure with quantitative criteria, it is certainly more controversial than the former as a goal for US nuclear weapons. The tolerance of US public opinion, and indeed of US leadership, for using nuclear weapons as instruments of warfare has to be taken into account, although it is difficult to predict in the abstract. For example, if tens of thousands of US lives were lost in a biological attack on US forces or the US homeland opinions could change rapidly and radically. It would clarify the discussion if the two goals (and their

relationships) were more clearly differentiated and the criteria to be used is assessing requirements were made explicit.